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RR RUEHAO
DE RUEHCV #0742/01 0801519
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 211519Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3627
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 6175
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ 1799
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 0008
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 1873
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 3356
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO 0681
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 0377
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE 2916
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000742

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HQ SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD, USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE FOR
CLAMBERT

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CARACAS-LA GUAIRA BRIDGE COLLAPSES

REF: CARACAS 00459

This message is sensitive but unclassified, please treat
accordingly.

Summary

1. (SBU) On March 19, the closed bridge linking Caracas and its international air and sea ports collapsed. Chavez and the Ministry of Infrastructure (MINFRA) both stated that the BRV had knowledge of the imminent collapse and were planning to demolish the bridge, but that they didn't release this information due to "fear of rumors." The narrow bypass road, opened on February 26, has absorbed most of the traffic flow and has reduced travel time to the airport over three-fold. However, significant delays are still reported during rush hours and steep pitching on the sides of the road could pose mudslide risk when the rainy season begins in a few weeks. The coastal state of Vargas is showing signs of recovery as tourists return. Post lifted travel restrictions on March 8, ending armored shuttle service and allowing Embassy personnel to use personal vehicles to travel the bypass road. End Summary.

Bridge collapses, BRV reaction

2. (SBU) On the morning of Sunday, March 19, the structurally-damaged bridge linking Caracas and La Guaira collapsed, leaving mounds of debris and a dramatic photo opportunity (Note: to see images of the collapse visit www.eluniversal.com/2006/03/19/pol_fot_19A684759.shtml. End Note.) The Vice-Minister for Infrastructure appeared shortly on the scene, declaring that the BRV had made plans over the last week to demolish the structure, but had not publicly announced it in order to "avoid rumors." A day earlier, a MINFRA spokesperson had said that the bridge was not in "a grave situation" (read: imminent danger of collapse). President Chavez, in his March 19 "Alo Presidente," "thanked the bridge" for its 50-plus years of service, and took the opportunity to attack Globovision, an opposition-leaning news channel, for attempting to criticize the government's handling of the bridge crisis and infrastructure issues in

general.

Traffic flow back to normal, kind of

¶3. (U) Since the opening of the two-lane, 2.5 km bypass road on February 26 (Ref A), the average time to get to the airport from Caracas has decreased considerably (from 3-5 hrs average to one hour or less). However, there are still some delays along the way. During rush hours or when cargo traffic is heavy, the wait to get on the bypass road increases considerably (up to 3 hrs in some instances), and the National Guard has periodically cut off traffic to allow both lanes to move in one direction in order to clear out backlogs. The road is in good condition, but steep pitching on either side poses a significant mudslide threat. MINFRA is installing netting and barriers along the road in an effort to mitigate this risk.

¶4. (U) The road, while greatly alleviating the traffic flow problems caused by use of the "Old Highway," cannot fully replace the pre-closure capacity. Due to delays, many travelers still choose the "Old Highway," despite removal of National Guard presence and safety concerns. The state of Vargas is showing signs of recuperation and weekend beaches are again filled with tourists.

Post lifts restrictions

¶5. (U) In view of the bridge bypass road opening, Post

CARACAS 00000742 002 OF 002

lifted travel restrictions for Embassy personnel on March 8, suspending armored shuttle service indefinitely. Embassy personnel are free to use their personal vehicles or other transport on the bridge bypass road and on the Galipan-Avila route (on 4x4 vehicles only). The "Old Highway" is off-limits for personnel at all times, due to safety concerns.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) The collapse of the fractured bridge was predictable and expected, given the unstable geology of the area. The BRV's statements that the bridge was going to be demolished are dubious, since neither the Ministry of Infrastructure nor anyone else in the BRV had announced that previously. The excuse of "avoiding rumors" masks the irresponsibility of withholding information on the obvious safety risks of the collapse. The BRV was lucky that nobody was under the bridge when it fell. The bridge collapse is a powerful image that some media outlets tried to use to exemplify Chavez' poor record on infrastructure. However, it has not had visible political implications for Chavez so far.

End Comment.
BROWNFIELD